



Image by Chelsea Flook

# IT'S TIME FOR GOVERNMENTS TO LISTEN TO WORKERS IN LONG-TERM CARE HOMES

**Jan Malek**

11 months ago

I recently had the opportunity to participate in a video conference where long-term care workers from across the country spoke about their experiences with the COVID-19 outbreak in Canada. Their stories echoed with sadness and frustration as they described the tragedy that has transpired in many homes across the country.

To date, more than 8,800 people have died in seniors' care homes across Canada from COVID-19, the majority of them in long-term care homes, [according to numbers compiled by freelance journalist Nora Loreto](#). This number represents more than 80 per cent of all COVID-19 deaths in the country.

Canada's shameful record of COVID fatalities in long-term care is the highest of all developed country in the world. [A report](#) by the Canadian Institute of Health Information found that "the proportion of deaths occurring in long-term care (LTC) is double the OECD average." It is a national tragedy that cannot be ignored, especially as the threat of another wave of COVID-19 infections looms.

Workers in long-term care homes have unique insights on what is needed to avoid additional tragedies. Governments should be listening to their experiences closely – not to the managers or the corporate faces representing the homes – but the people who work and provide care in the homes (and whenever possible, the people who live in them too).

Here are some things I learned from long-term care workers:

- There was a lack of communication in the first wave of COVID-19. Many workers reported difficulty getting information on infection rates and weren't always made aware of who was sick with the virus. This lack of information made it difficult to limit the spread.
- In some provinces the health directives were unclear and poorly communicated within the homes. One worker said they knew they should wear a face mask, but the management of the home they worked in discouraged it because it would "scare the residents."
- Many workers said they had to "beg" for proper personal protective equipment (PPE). Homes are required to have a three-month supply in case of outbreaks or pandemics but many workers found the supplies were old and degraded, or

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not substantial enough in quantity to last longer than a few weeks. A number of workers reported Unions stepping in with deliveries of hand sanitizer, face masks and other PPE.

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- There was a lack of clarity about where care should occur – should infected residents stay in the home or be transported to a hospital? In one Ontario long-term care home, infected residents were moved from the home to a field hospital that was specifically set up to for COVID-19 patients. This lessened the spread and helped protect residents and workers who remained in the home.
- Workers said some homes took too long to stop visitors from entering, or to limit staff (while supplementing their hours and income) to working in only one home.
- By far, the most repeated concern workers expressed was staffing shortages. Workers have been sounding the alarm of staffing shortages in long-term care homes for years and they say the pandemic made this crisis even worse.

[The 2019 report Caring in Crisis](#), prepared by the Ontario Health Coalition and put directly into Ontario Premier Doug Ford's hands in December – months before the pandemic hit – provides documentation on the staffing shortage crisis in Ontario. Other provinces are experiencing similar shortages. Quebec, for example, has said it will hire 10,000 new long-term care workers, pay them higher wages and give them a government pension.

"In every town, in virtually every long-term care home, on virtually every shift, long-term care homes are working short-staffed. It is no overstatement to call the situation a crisis," the report states. "It impacts the vital functions of care, leaving inadequate time to provide even basic care for residents. We heard that across Ontario as a result of the shortage, baths are skipped, care is rushed, and residents feel like a burden to overstretched staff."

Workers say these staffing shortages cause them immense stress and they worry about being able to provide the care those living in long-term care homes need. Added to that is their fear of contracting COVID-19, as many workers already have, and putting their own lives – and the lives of their family members – at risk.

The Council of Canadians is calling on governments across the country to do more to support and protect both the residents of long-term care and those who work to care for them.

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